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ISLAMISM AND REGIME CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: LOOKING BEYOND THE ARAB UPRISINGS

By Ewan Stein and Frédéric Volpi

In the three and a half years since the popular uprising in Tunisia inaugurated the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, new political dynamics have been unleashed across the Middle East and North Africa. In four countries—Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen—sitting rulers were deposed, leading to some form of regime change. In each case Islamist movements sought, in different ways, to fill the void. Initially, as the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda surged into prominence in Egypt and Tunisia respectively, the star of political Islam seemed to be on an unstoppable rise. The Islah Party, main vehicle of the Brothers in Yemen, moved to centre stage in the wake of president Saleh’s departure. The Muslim Brotherhood’s less than decisive electoral showing in Libya did not much detract from the overall impression that across the region a new era of Islamism was dawning. Islamism, it suddenly seemed, may not only be compatible with democratisation but could act as a potential catalyst for it in the Arab world.

Islamism was also reappraised with fresh eyes as Western audiences, perhaps for the first time, encountered well-spoken and reasonable sounding representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda and other groups, as well as tech-savvy Islamist youth. This marked a sea change in the prevailing policy and media discourse of demonization and fear that had surrounded political Islam in the decade following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States. If there was a warming of attitudes to political Islam in Western policy circles, however, many of the region’s more secular actors felt abandoned by the West. In Egypt and Tunisia in particular, the electoral success of Islamist parties was met with deep foreboding. A seemingly irreconcilable schism between Islamists and secularists paralysed political life in Egypt and Tunisia. Matters came to a head with the fall of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. Riding a wave of popular discontent, the military turned on the Brotherhood and its supporters. Anti-Islamists figures in civil society and the media reverted to the discourse of the war on terror. The Muslim Brotherhood, according to this narrative, was a terrorist group,

and all those who associated themselves with it were also terrorists or apologists for terrorism. Reconciliation and compromise were no longer on the table.

Western attitudes towards Islamist parties mellowed as the reality of their political ascendance became evident in the wake of the uprisings. As a result, the anti-Islamist hysteria emanating from Egypt, and encouraged for tactical reasons by some Gulf states, is received with more scepticism today than it was before the Arab uprisings. Nonetheless, the reaction of Western democracies to the military's counterrevolution in Egypt has been timid and at times incoherent. While the Obama administration has criticised the relapse into authoritarianism, its overall response has been muted. The new and complex political re-articulations of Islamism across the region after the uprisings has created policy dilemmas for the international community, and many international players have been returning by default to the familiar territory of demonising Islamism.

Prompted by the military coup in Egypt, the continuing lack of stable and working state institutions in Libya and Yemen, and the disappointing socio-economic improvements in Tunisia, a feeling of disenchantment with 'regime change' has set in across the region for Islamists and other political actors alike. Instead of having a virtuous circle of political change created by collaboration between international actors, Islamist and non-Islamist political actors, and the citizens of the region, vicious circles of authoritarianism and violence are regaining momentum as a consequence of the actions of a few political actors opposed to democratic change.

Developments in the Middle East and North Africa since the uprisings began have revealed, more clearly than ever, that political Islam is not a unitary phenomenon. The types of political and social activism that are often unthinkingly categorised as 'Islamist' are many and are not all aiming to achieve the same goals. To counter overly simplistic or misleading analyses of Islamism, and to provide clarity to the process of policy making, the contributions to this report differentiate between three different forms (or levels) of Islamist activism—political, grassroots and violent activism—in order to map the evolution of Islamist actors beyond the Arab uprisings.

Islamist political activism

Political activism refers to institutionalised participation within the context of the existing order. While recognising that 'the political' extends deeper than the state

level, for clarity we distinguish this level of activism by its connection with formal politics at the national level. In Egypt the exemplar of Islamist political activism prior to the fall of Mubarak was the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been involved in electoral politics since 1984. In Tunisia, Ennahda—suppressed after the partial democratic opening of the late 1980s—nevertheless called for democratic reform during its years in exile and clandestinity. In Yemen, the Islah Party represented the main manifestation of national-level Islamist coalition politics. At the opposite end of the participative spectrum, Ghaddafi's Libya offered no scope for political expression, Islamist or otherwise, even though in the 2000s moves toward reconciliation were afoot between the Brotherhood and the regime.

Political contestation in the Arab world in the last 30 years has been increasingly articulated and demarcated via the language of religion, not least due to the fact that opportunities for political dissent were blocked. Authoritarian regimes often encouraged Islamist parties in order to undermine the ideological leadership of left-wing actors, but then curtailed their activities in high politics. In Egypt, Islamist parliamentary activists engaged with a range of mundane social policies and committee work but tended to stop short of frontal opposition to the regime, which would be to invite repression. As such, debate and disagreement within the public sphere increasingly revolved around the role of religion in public life and pitted 'Islamists' against 'secularists'.

The Arab uprisings, even in opening up political systems, have not as yet enabled political debate to transcend the previously demarcated boundaries. If anything, the schism between Islamists and secularists appears to be widening. This is reflected in competing narratives of the uprisings (or 'revolutions') themselves. For many Islamists, secular parties are tainted by their previous dependence on and complicity with the old regimes, and are thus inherently counterrevolutionary. Established secular actors and newer protest movements, conversely, ascribe authoritarian and 'theocratic' tendencies to Islamists, and also point to the opportunistic collusion that existed between Islamist groups and regimes. Today, the fact that the conflict between Islamists and secularists seems not to be abating, particularly in Egypt but also in Tunisia, and in different ways in Libya and Yemen, suggests that despite regime change, meaningful political debate is still very constrained by this authoritarian legacy.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the ‘moderation’ of Islamists, which necessitated the abandonment or postponement of revolutionary goals (not least the overthrow of corrupt regimes and the construction of just Islamic societies ruled according to shari‘a) appealed to middle class constituencies benefiting from the status quo, but left many of their more downtrodden followers dissatisfied. If one of the main successes of institutionalised Islamist activism after the Arab uprisings was to illustrate that it could become a ‘normal’ form of political activism in a multiparty system, one of its main failures was to show to the disenfranchised who had hoped for a radical transformation of their life that Islamist parties were perhaps no better than other political parties. This helps explain the increased salience, following the revolutions, of other modalities of Islamist activism: grassroots and violent activism.

Grassroots Islamist activism

Grassroots activism denotes ‘apolitical’ or ‘infra-political’ local-level organisational, preaching and charitable activity. Grassroots activism is central to political Islam, as grassroots networks help to structure support and advance the vision of an Islamic society. Even if many grassroots activists, for principled or pragmatic reasons, eschew politics, their activism plays a role in crystallising a devout bourgeoisie that represents an important constituency for Islamist parties. Most Islamist political actors began their careers as grassroots activists. Although a turn towards political activism does not normally signify a rejection of grassroots activism, movements choosing this path become more susceptible to competition from and criticism by other Islamist organisations focusing solely on the grassroots level.

The decades since the 1970s have seen the rise in many Arab countries of Salafism as a grassroots religious movement. This ultra-conservative form of religious piety influenced by Wahhabism and focusing on societal issues has commonly pushed Salafi actors to ‘fill a void’ left by weak or retreating states, and they have often been supported by regimes for precisely this purpose. From the perspective of regimes, Salafis have had the distinct advantage of being avowedly apolitical and, indeed, direct rivals to the Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islamists. In many Arab states the regime’s sponsorship of Salafi groups represented a form of dividing and ruling over the Islamist movement as a whole. These intra-Islamist schisms have also become more pronounced following the uprisings in many Arab states.

The extent and nature of repression in each state affected the ability of Islamist political activists to connect with and mobilise broader publics. In Egypt, particularly from the mid-1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood represented a high-risk vehicle for political and religious expression due to frequent regime clampdowns on the movement. As such, grassroots activism by Salafi organisations offered a safer alternative. Although often passing under the radar at the time, these quietist strategies and dynamics help explain the sudden surge of Salafi activism following the uprisings. Salafism exists in particular as a significant trend among the poorer and marginalised strata of society (*muhammishin*), and can pose a challenge to the moderation and institutionalisation of Islamist groups by diluting support for formal politics.

The rise of Salafism should also be understood in the context of broader regional shifts, particularly the rise of Saudi and Wahhabi economic and ideological power. But recognition of these regional dynamics should not lead to the conclusion that all Salafis are alike or are externally controlled. Doctrinal and strategic differences exist, and Salafis are often as rooted locally as they are committed to a transnational, ‘deterritorialised’ vision of conservative Islamic rule. The Arab uprisings have demonstrated that fissures exist inside the Salafi sphere in different states and that Salafi actors are as capable of devising flexible and pragmatic strategies as others, including opting for political engagement following the fall of the old regimes.

Violent Islamist activism

Islamist advocates of the establishment of an Islamic order through the use of force have been a persistent and noticeable trend in Arab politics at least since the 1970s. Whether they are primarily endorsing the use of violence under the guise of a defence of an idealised Islamic community on ideological/theological grounds, or whether they turn to armed jihad as a pragmatic response to the attempts by the state to repress other forms of Islamic activism, they have become a major factor shaping the political landscape of the region. In addition, since the turn of the century, an increasingly prominent aspect of jihadi activism has been its transnational/global character.

By the start of the Arab uprisings, all the countries considered in this report had experienced political violence led by such jihadi movements, from the extensive

challenges of the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda in the 2000s, to the episodic challenges of jihadi groups based in Egypt and Libya in the 1990s, and the occasional small-scale flare up of transnational violence in Tunisia. Whilst the mass uprisings witnessed in the region in 2011 did not involve in any significant way the jihadi organisations, and the fall of much despised authoritarian regimes to democratic protests undermined traditional jihadi rhetoric blaming ‘apostates’ and ‘infidels’, the aftermath of the uprisings provided new opportunities for them. The diminished state capabilities of the new post-uprising regimes, particularly in relation to the use of the repressive apparatus, enabled the jihadi groups/jihadists to operate with fewer constraints.

The entrenchment of domestic conflicts in Libya and Yemen (as well as the transnational implications of the Syrian conflict and the precarious situation in Iraq), have enabled jihadists to increase their military capabilities and strengthen their regional networks. While the process of democratisation of the countries of the Arab uprisings might have durably weakened the revolutionist Islamist agenda of the jihadists, the practical failings of the new political elites in establishing a functioning democratic order often ensured that this opportunity did not become reality. Instead, events like the return to power of secular autocrats in Egypt and the ensuing crackdown on Islamist political activism reaffirmed the continuing relevance of earlier jihadi discourses and legitimisation of violence against such authoritarian regimes and their allies at home and abroad.

Conclusions

In the last few decades in the Arab world, as there were no effective political mechanisms for mediating between different societal interests, competition was expressed via a cultural and religious prism. These socio-cultural differences, and the way they are instrumentalised by the state, are thus essential to understanding both the salience of Islamist politics in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, and the differences between the discourses and practices of Islamism across the region. A Salafi in Tunisia, for example, is not the same as a Salafi in Yemen. These categories of Islamism are always evolving, and whilst we can identify some rather stable longer-term trajectories, it is also crucial to realise that a changing political context, and notably regime change, can reshape significantly Islamist identities and strategies. The Arab uprisings have initiated such a re-articulation of Islamism in different

countries, and the significance of this transformation is directly linked to the nature and intensity of the changes in the overall political system.

This report thus addresses political Islam at a critical juncture. Any policy-relevant assessment of the state of political Islam in the Arab transition states has to address the following four main issues:

1. To present the dynamics of each country without invoking an over-simplistic totalising discourse on Islamism
2. To evaluate the intensity and characteristics of the conflict between Islamists and secularists in each state
3. To detail what role Islamist groups can still play in the process of democratisation
4. To differentiate between the dynamics of political, grassroots and violent Islamist trends.